

OXFAM COACHING UPDATE



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Welcome to issue no 16 of the Coaching Update, designed to share ideas and experiences around coaching across our organisation.

In the last update we focused on how coaches can respond with agility and adapt their approach according to the needs of the coachee.

In this update we look at the impact of cultural values and beliefs in the coaching relationship.

Coaching with Culture in Mind

In this Coaching Update we're building on the topic of the previous edition (developing greater agility in order to support the coachee and their needs), and we'll be considering more specifically the impact of cultural values in coaching. For the purposes of this exploration, I'm going to be thinking about culture as the values, beliefs and even fears which hold a group together and which shape its behaviours. These 'operating principles' tend to be unspoken and therefore unexamined.

There are a number of hazards in exploring this territory – so let's tread carefully! I'm sure that given the contexts you work in that you'll already be aware of the need for caution, but here's a reminder of some of the main challenges in exploring culture:

1. It's easy to typify the cultural values of any particular individual as being determined largely by national or geographic boundaries, and whilst these can be important, it's important to be mindful of other factors which may be equally or even more significant: education, gender, religion, generation, socio-economic background, organisation, department etc.
2. None of us therefore represent the values of one culture only – we are all essentially multi-cultural beings – and we each negotiate what can sometimes be experienced as competing values in order to adapt our behaviours to the different environments and groupings we find ourselves in.
3. Because culture is a complex area, we tend to make generalisations as a coping mechanism, but at the risk of creating stereotypes. And it's easier to create a stereotype about an individual or group which we consider as 'the other' ('Oh well that's the Campaigns Department for you, that's just typical'), whilst within our own groupings we perceive difference differently.
4. Rather than treating cultural awareness as uni-directional in focus (emphasising the

differences or similarities of the 'other'), we also need to keep in mind how our own cultural identity is perceived. This is challenging because unlike looks or personality, which differentiate us from other members of our group, these assumptions are unspoken and constantly re-enforced by the group as a basis for membership.

All coaching is cross-cultural

It's probably best to anticipate that all our coaching relationships will be cross-cultural to some degree, where both coach and coachee represent a mix of their own and culturally inherited values and beliefs which guide their behaviour.

We often become blind to the cross-cultural dimension of coaching, however, so when we notice it can take us by surprise! I think this is partly due to the relationships we seek to build with the coachee, in which the differences which might otherwise divide (seniority, gender, nationality, role etc) are down-played, as a way of helping us to find commonality, trust and rapport as a basis for working together. But *outside* of the coaching relationship the coachee is likely to demonstrate different values and behaviours as a way of functioning and retaining their place within their own grouping. This can be confusing for the coach who may be building a different picture of the coachee based on their relationship with them, and may fail to grasp the impact of forces within the coachee's system. Furthermore, if they do start to notice them, they can interpret them as annoying or even 'wrong', especially if they clash with their own values, or seem to contradict coaching principles ('It's important for people to find and explore their authentic selves - you shouldn't have to hide what they really think just to fit in – that's not right!'), instead of simply seeing and accepting these forces just as they are.

Is coaching culturally neutral?

In exploring the impact of culture in coaching it's important to examine whether or not coaching itself is a cultural or value free technology. Can the assumptions and values which coaching embodies be applied universally? And if not, who or what needs to change?

Before we can even ask that question it's important to unpack an assumption that coaching is a 'thing', perhaps *one* 'thing' rather than a term which is used to try and hold together a whole range of conflicting approaches and paradigms about how human beings and organisations grow and flourish! So it's important to see coaching as multi-cultural as well as multi-disciplinary, whilst at the same time recognising that there are some powerful discourses which have shaped what coaching has become today.

Many of these discourses are based on a core assumption that an individual can, with the right support, beliefs and motivation realise their full potential as a human being. We could call this the discourse of the 'celebrated self' as opposed to the discourse of the 'wounded self', or even the 'non-self'. Positive psychology has made a significant contribution to coaching beliefs and values, and in turn has its roots in the humanistic approaches which evolved from post-war 1950's United States¹.

Other influencers and shapers have included OD and leadership development, human potential movement, facilitation, career development theory etc.

Some more recent influencers include Eastern philosophy, most commonly in the form of mindfulness and meditation practices, and neuroscience. As well as the insights into human functioning which neuroscience brings, I believe it is also being used as a means to try and create a coherent narrative of coaching. But we need to be aware that neuroscience itself is

also not neutral— as well as being a relatively new field it is also a product of the interests and beliefs of the people who shape it and interpret it.

Compared to coaching, mentoring is a much older and potentially more universal tradition. Here the mentor's life experience and knowledge is valued and utilised, and mentoring is often a longer-term relationship in which the mentee is supported through key rites of passage (in life, in career, leadership development), in contrast to the narrower goals to which coaching is typically applied. I wonder whether cultural challenges in coaching could potentially be reduced if we let ourselves see coaching and mentoring as being on different parts of the same helping styles continuum where the practitioner (be they coach or mentor) can act flexibly along that spectrum according to what will best serve the development needs of the coachee/mentee.

Modifying learnt behaviours

Recognising the culturally informed assumptions which underpin coaching enables us to negotiate and if need be modify our approaches in order to make our interactions as relevant and useful as possible to different audiences.

For example, if we explore beliefs about change, coaching methodologies tend to emphasise the role of self-awareness and self-determination as critical. The emphasis is on individual achievement, and any focus on the wider context (family, relationships, employer, boss, team, society etc), is most often geared towards how these relationships can be leveraged to support the coachee's goals. This is in sharp contrast to a view that personal growth should be and indeed *is* determined by and in the service of the collective. So the coach may need to adopt a different mindset in order to partner with that world-view, where the opinion and support of the coachee's boss or team may be much more relevant in determining personal or career goals. The coach can then reframe their purpose as being that of a participant within a wider process, rather than narrowly focused on helping to achieve the personal needs and wants of the coachee.

Consider also the emphasis in a lot of coaching on goal-setting as fundamental to supporting change. Yet this may not travel well where there is a perception (or reality!) that life is complex and unpredictable, or that the course of life is not something to be determined but accepted, or even subject to fate or divine will. Here it may be far more effective for the coach to focus on building awareness and responsibility for action rather than on goal achievement per se. Interestingly, recent research by leading experts in the field carried out on the role of goals in coaching suggests that as many as 98% of coaches (from Europe and the United States) reported that goals agreed with coachees at the beginning of the coaching relationship changed in the course of the relationship². So it would appear that goal-setting needs to be approached differently in Western contexts also.

The role of educational background can also have an important impact in coaching. Some cultures favour intellectual and theory based sparring as an essential ingredient in the learning process. With coachees from such a background we might feel pushed into debating ideas in a game to see who knows the most, or who can present the most brilliant argument. Here the coach can play a role in building a bridge between theory and practice – engaging with the coachees thinking and recognising that exploring the world of ideas is both stimulating and energising for the coachee, whilst also supporting them to apply their thinking into practice.

There is also the coaching relationship. Most coaching books I've read emphasise the need for equality between coach and coachee – there is no expert-novice, teacher-pupil

relationship here! This can be challenging to insist on in cultures where the constant flow of respect, gratitude and responsibility between younger and older, senior and junior holds relationships and communities together. Perhaps for some of us, we need to become more gracious in receiving a coachee's gratitude and respect for having supported their growth, rather than pushing it away.

In 'high power distance'³ cultures there can also be a strong pull from the coachee for more of a mentoring relationship. The coach may need to review the contract with the coachee, and agree that whilst they may at times draw on their experience and knowledge to support the coachee's thinking, they will nevertheless withhold specific advice, and not diminish the coachee's responsibility for their choices and actions. One of coaching's assumptions being tested here is the belief that individuals *always* have the solution within themselves, and don't need the coach's input. Interestingly a recent report on coaching in China⁴ showed that whilst coaches reported some 'pure' coaching taking place, there was quite a lot of coaching mixed with mentoring. Given the context of coachees being young, internationally educated MBA grads who have been fast-tracked into high levels of responsibility and leadership within large corporations, a mentoring as opposed to a pure coaching approach would seem the appropriate, and possibly more responsible course of action.

Final thoughts

So where does this leave us? Should we try and become coaching chameleons?

Ghandi once said 'I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.' There's a sense that in becoming more culturally open and adaptable we also need to be grounded in our own authentic sense of self and values. A large part of the developmental journey for a coach is a better understanding of his/herself, which also includes our culturally inherited values.

Recognising our own cultural influences then helps us to see where we might need to adapt to the coachee. If I recognise that my thinking style tends to be concrete and linear (because I've been encultured and educated to think in that way and my rewards and recognitions to date have been based on my clear, outcome focused thinking), and if I can understand that this is neither right nor wrong, and that there are other thinking styles which are just as valid (circular, holistic, systems focused, abstract, metaphoric..) then I can relax into the dynamic of the coaching relationship and start to enjoy what I might learn from the coachee.

And perhaps there are some parallels between this exploration of coaching across cultural diversity and what is happening wider within the coaching profession. The newly created Global Coaching and Mentoring Alliance⁵ is a commitment by the three largest professional coaching bodies to act as a collective voice to strengthen a common ground for effective practice. The joint values which they have chosen to adopt to support them in working across conflicting beliefs and interests are:

- Courage
- Collaboration
- Integrity
- Respect
- Trust

Personally I think this looks like a great list of values to aspire to, and which can support both coach and coachee to work effectively together, and for both to keep learning from the experience of working across difference.

References and further reading

1. See http://coachinghistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/EMCC_2010_Secret_History_of_Coaching-Brock-Final.pdf for a potted history of coaching, also 'The Hidden History of Coaching' (Wildflower, 2013).
2. 'Beyond Goals: Effective Strategies for Coaching and Mentoring' (David, Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2013)

Abstract from publishers website

<http://www.gowerpublishing.com/isbn/9781409418511>

'Without goals, how can developmental relationships succeed? Pick up almost any classical text on coaching and the importance of setting goals - clear, SMART, challenging goals - is emphasised throughout. And yet the evidence is growing that the neat cycle of 'set goal - plan how to achieve - implement plan' is at the very least seriously flawed and at worst highly dysfunctional.

This challenging book overturns many of the basic assumptions about how goal setting works in developmental relationships. It draws upon recent research from several sources - including separate studies by the two editors - demonstrating that the more specific personal development goals are, the less they are likely to be achieved; and that the most effective strategy is to achieve both a broad sense of direction and high goal alignment. Traditional goal setting can easily become a crutch for poor coaching; or worse a straightjacket.

The implications of this re-assessment of the role of goals are substantial for all those practising as coaches and mentors, or managing coaching or mentoring initiatives in organizations. The editors/ authors provide guidance and advice on how to work with and build on emergent goals.'

3. Power distance and other culturally influenced dimensions are discussed in 'Riding the Waves of Culture' (Trompenaars, 1993), and 'Coaching Across Cultures' (Rosinski, 2003).
4. 'Second Comprehensive Coaching Study in China: China specific insights into coaching' (2012)
http://www.apacoaches.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=41:2nd-coaching-in-china-survey&catid=1:news&Itemid=6

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